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ABSTRACT

Almost every high school in the United States offers some type of extracurricular activity. This document examines the relationship between extracurricular participation and student engagement in school using data from 1992 public high school seniors in the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS). It also explores whether the availability of these activities varies according to school characteristics, and whether participation differs according to student background and school setting. Although it is not known if the relationship between participation in extracurricular activities and success in school is causal, the data show a strong association between extracurricular participation and each of the following success indicators--better attendance, higher academic achievement, and aspirations to higher levels of education. The data also indicate that differences in participation were not related to differences in availability, as extracurricular activities were available to virtually all high school seniors regardless of affluence, size, location, or minority status of schools. However, students of low socioeconomic status (SES) participated less than did their high-SES classmates. Despite the gap, however, low-SES students participated at fairly high levels and persisted in their participation regardless of the relative affluence of the schools they attended. Three tables are included. It is suggested that further study of the individual constraints of poverty and family background and the influence of school community on student engagement would be valuable. (LMI)

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EDUCATION POLICY ISSUES: STATISTICAL PERSPECTIVES

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The NCES Education Policy Issues series is designed to provide the best statistical information available on important policy questions. The series primarily provides responses grounded in statistical findings, but also, as appropriate, provides some information based on smaller scale research and case studies.

Almost every high school in the U.S. offers some type of extracurricular activity, such as music, academic clubs, and sports. These activities offer opportunities for students to develop the values of teamwork, individual and group responsibility, physical strength and endurance, a sense of community, and enjoyment of leisure time. Extracurricular activities provide a channel for reinforcing the lessons learned in the classroom, applying academic skills in a real-world context, and thus may be considered part of a well-rounded education. Recent research suggests that participation in extracurricular activities may increase students' sense of engagement or attachment to their school, and thereby decrease the likelihood of school failure (Lamborn et al, 1992; Finn, 1993). If, indeed, participation in extracurricular activities can contribute to success in school, then the availability of these activities to students of all backgrounds becomes an issue of equity. This issue brief examines the relationship between extracurricular participation and student engagement in school using data from 1992 public high school seniors in the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS). The brief also explores whether the availability of these activities varies according to school characteristics, and whether participation differs according to student background and school setting.

Is participation in extracurricular activities related to students' success in school?

Indicators of successful participation in school include consistent attendance, academic achievement, and aspirations for continuing education beyond high school. Extracurricular participation[1] was positively associated with each of these success indicators among public high school seniors in 1992 (table 1). During the first semester of their senior year, participants reported better attendance than their nonparticipating classmates - half of them had no unexcused absences from school and half had never skipped a class, compared with one-third and two-fifths of nonparticipants, respectively. Students who participated were three times as likely to have a grade point average of 3.0 or higher and twice as likely to perform in the top quartile on a composite math and reading assessment compared with nonparticipants. Participants were also more likely than nonparticipants to aspire to higher education: two-thirds of participants expected to complete at least a bachelor's degree while about half of nonparticipants expected to do so. It cannot be known from these data, however, whether participation leads to success, successful students are more inclined to participate, or both occur.

Table 1. Percentage of public school seniors reporting selected indicators of school success by participation and non-participation in extracurricular activities, 1992

Indicators	Participants	Nonparticipants
No unexcused absences*	50.4	36.2
Never skipped classes*	50.7	42.3
Have a GPA of 3.0 or above	30.6	10.8
Highest quartile on a composite math and reading assessment	29.8	14.2
Expect to earn a bachelor's degree or higher	68.2	48.2

*During first semester of senior year.

Are extracurricular activities available to all students?

Virtually all students in public schools reported that a core of extracurricular activities was available to them, including sports, performing arts, publications, and honor societies; and all but a small percentage had access to academic clubs and student government (table 2). Slightly less available were non-academic clubs, such as vocational/professional clubs, followed by service and hobby clubs. Furthermore, despite concerns about scarce resources in schools serving poor students, no important differences in availability of extracurricular activities in relatively less affluent and more affluent

Table 2. Percentage of public school seniors reporting availability of selected extracurricular activities, by affluence of school, 1992

	Students reporting availability of activity (percent)		
	All public schools	Less affluent schools	More affluent schools
Any extracurricular activity	99.8	99.8	99.9
Publications	99.4	99.3	99.6
Performing arts	98.8	98.7	99.1
Sports (individual and team)	98.7	98.6	99.1
Honor societies	98.1	97.4	98.8
Student government	96.5	94.9	97.6
Academic clubs	95.9	94.6	97.0
Vocational/professional clubs	93.3	93.4	93.7
Service clubs	89.2	87.2	90.7
Hobby clubs	87.5	85.4	89.2

[1] A student was classified as a participant if he or she marked "participated" or "participated as an officer" in at least one of the extracurricular activities listed.

SOURCE: All data in this issue brief are from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Education Longitudinal Study, Second Follow-up 1992.

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schools[2] were found. Similarly, regardless of whether the schools attended were large (750 students or more) or small (less than 150), in rural, urban or suburban settings, or served relatively large (20 percent or more minority) or small proportions of minority students (less than 20 percent), almost all students reported that extracurricular activities were available to them (data not shown in table).

Who takes advantage of extracurricular activities?

About four of every five seniors said they participated in at least one extracurricular activity in the fall of 1992. Although a range of extracurricular activities was available to almost all students, students differed markedly in their choices of activities (table 3). Sports (either individual or team) had the widest participation, involving 42 percent of seniors, followed by performing arts and academic clubs. Honor societies, publications, and student government, which by definition have more limited memberships than other activities, each still drew 16 to 18 percent of seniors.

Table 3. Percentage of public school seniors participating in selected extracurricular activities by SES of student and affluence of school, 1992

		Low SES students		High SES students	
Selected activity	*All students	Less affluent schools	More affluent schools	Less affluent schools	More affluent schools
Any extracurricular activity	79.9	74.7	73.0	86.8	87.6
Sports (individual and team)	42.4	34.3	33.2	48.6	53.1
Performing arts	27.5	25.0	20.7	32.0	29.2
Academic clubs	26.2	20.2	20.5	36.2	32.3
Vocational/ professional clubs	20.8	29.2	25.6	16.0	11.8
Honor societies	18.1	10.3	10.0	30.8	29.9
Publications	17.0	17.6	9.5	22.4	20.0
Student government	15.5	12.6	9.9	17.5	20.9
Service clubs	15.2	10.0	9.4	25.0	21.1
Hobby clubs	8.5	8.2	6.9	9.4	9.6

*Includes students in middle two quartiles.

Although differences in availability of extracurricular opportunities between less affluent and more affluent schools were small or nonexistent, students of low socioeconomic status (SES) were less likely to participate in activities than were high SES students.[3] Almost three-quarters of low SES students participated in at least one activity compared with 87 percent of high SES students. The participation of low SES students was consistently lower than that of high SES students in each type of activity, with the exception of vocational or professional clubs, such as Future Farmers or Future Teachers of America, in which low SES students were almost twice as likely to participate.

Some researchers have suggested that the social context of the school might have a positive or negative influence on student behavior, depending on whether the individual student is in the relative minority or majority in the school (Karweit, 1983). Low SES students, for example, may be more likely to participate in schools where they are in the majority and less likely to participate in more affluent schools where they are in the relative minority. These data indicate, however, that regardless of their socioeconomic background, students' participation was not related to the social context of the school - low SES students participated at the same rates whether they attended less affluent or more affluent schools, and so did high SES students.

If individual socioeconomic factors, rather than school factors, account for differences in participation, what is it about individuals, particularly those from lower SES families, that might make a difference? Researchers have identified several barriers to student participation, ranging from the more tangible, including family or work responsibilities, limited resources for equipment or other expenses, and transportation or other logistical difficulties, to the more complex, such as lack of interest in or alienation from school and its activities (Kleese and D'Onofrio, 1994).

Discussion

Although it cannot be known from these data whether the relationship between participation in extracurricular activities and success in school is causal, and although degree or intensity of participation is not measured, it is clear that participation and success are strongly associated as evidenced by participants' better attendance, higher levels of achievement, and aspirations to higher levels of education. Furthermore, the data indicate that differences in participation were not related to differences in availability, as extracurricular activities were available to virtually all high school seniors regardless of the affluence, size, location or minority status of the schools students attended. Despite wide availability of activities, low SES students participated less than did their high SES classmates. This participation gap is a cause for concern, especially if extracurricular activities can be a means of bringing at-risk students more fully into the school community, thereby increasing their chances of school success. In spite of the gap, however, low SES students participated at fairly high levels, and they persisted in their participation regardless of the relative affluence of the schools they attended. Neither the gap nor the persistence is explained by these data, but together they suggest the value of further study of the individual constraints of poverty and family background and the influence of school community on student engagement.

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[2] School affluence was defined by the percent of the student body receiving free or reduced price lunches; schools at 20 percent or more students receiving free lunch were considered less affluent and those with less than 20 percent more affluent.

[3] Low and high SES are defined as the bottom and top quartile, respectively, of a composite measure of parent education and occupational status and of family income.

This brief was prepared by Eileen O'Brien of Policy Studies Associates and Mary Rollefson of the National Center for Education Statistics. For more information on the National Education Longitudinal Study call Jeffrey Owings at 202-219-1777.

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